



# What you should know about **Smallpox**

## **ABOUT THE DISEASE**

### **Is smallpox a threat?**

We have no evidence that there is currently an increased risk of a smallpox outbreak or bioterrorism attack.

The last case of smallpox in the US occurred in 1949, and the last case in the world occurred in Africa in 1977. The World Health Organization declared that naturally occurring smallpox infection was eliminated from the world in 1980. Routine vaccination against smallpox in the United States ended in 1972, because suffering side effects from the vaccine had become a greater risk than getting the disease in the Western Hemisphere. However, some governments preserved samples of the smallpox virus, so there is a remote risk that smallpox could be used as a biological weapon.

### **What is smallpox?**

Smallpox is a severe infection caused by a virus - the *Variola* virus. Prior to the discovery of a vaccine in 1796, smallpox infection was common throughout the world.

### **How is smallpox spread?**

People may get exposed to smallpox by coming into contact with the droplets of saliva released when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes, or through direct contact with contaminated materials.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms begin to appear within 7 to 19 days after exposure to the virus. Initial symptoms may include high fever (above 101° F), fatigue, headache and backache. One to four days after the first symptoms, the infected person develops a rash that is most prominent on the face, legs and arms. The rash starts as flat, red lesions; over the next two days, these lesions fill with pus. The lesions begin to form a crust early in the second week of illness, and then develop into scabs. The scabs fall off after three to four weeks.

### **How long is a person with smallpox contagious?**

People with smallpox are not contagious until they develop a rash, which may begin on the skin or in the mouth. They are most infectious during the first week of illness because that is when the largest amount of virus is present in saliva. However, risk of transmission lasts until all scabs have fallen off (approximately three to four weeks).

### **What treatment is available for smallpox?**

Although research continues, there is currently no proven treatment for smallpox. Patients with smallpox can benefit from supportive therapy (intravenous fluids, medicine to control fever or pain) and antibiotics for any secondary bacterial infections. The majority of patients with smallpox recover, but death occurs in up to 30 percent of cases. Smallpox vaccine, if given to people who are exposed to smallpox within four days of exposure, may lessen the severity of the illness or possibly prevent it entirely.

### **What do I do if I have smallpox symptoms?**

If you have symptoms, please consult a healthcare provider immediately. Again, there is no evidence of increased risk of a smallpox outbreak or bioterrorism attack using smallpox, but the United States does maintain an emergency supply of smallpox vaccine. The vaccine is not available to the general public because it presents a significant risk of severe side effects.

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